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DESIGNING ACCESS, NOT JUST SCHOOLS (OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN):EQUITY-DRIVEN LESSONS FOR PAKISTAN FROM THE U.S. IN ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL EXCLUSION

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Abstract
The persistent crisis of out-of-school-children (OOSC) reveals deep-rooted structural, social and policy-level barriers that continue to obstruct equitable access to schooling. The challenge extends far beyond the mere availability of schools or financial constraints alone. Instead, it reflects a threefold imbalance: centralized education system that creates a disconnect between policy decisions and their implementation, socio-economic pressures that push children toward labor rather than schools and a public–private education conundrum links quality to private schools, yet high fees make them inaccessible for low-income families. Public schools are free but often lack quality, leaving parents with no viable option. This quality-affordability gap drives children out of school and fuels Pakistan's OOSC crisis. This integrative research examines these interconnected contributors to Pakistan's out-of-school children problem. By drawing a comparative lens to the United States, a system with near-universal enrollment and stronger public-school performance, this study seeks to identify structural lessons that may support more inclusive, sustainable and effective education planning in Pakistan.

Introduction:
Despite the constitutional guarantee under Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan mandating free and compulsory education for all children aged 5 to 16, an estimated 26.2 million children remain out of school (UNESCO Islamabad n.d.; Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training 2024b). The governance of education system, centralized or decentralized, has a great influence on student enrollment and outcomes, school quality, motivation among teachers and community participation in schools. As a civil servant in Pakistan, I have seen the banes of centralized system and have observed myself its repercussions for the education system. Centralization crumbles decision making and implementation, reduces motivation among lower tiers of leadership and delays improvements that schools urgently need. Resultantly, it hits education governance with consequence of out-of-school-children. At the same time, socioeconomic pressures such as poverty, unemployment and child labor continue to push children away from school. Families struggling with daily survival often view schooling as a financial burden, especially when they see limited economic returns from education (Clark and Martorell 2014). The public–private education divide further complicates the situation: public schools often lack quality and facilities, while private schools remain too expensive for the majority. This combination of governance failures, economic hardship and unequal access to quality education creates deep and persistent barriers to universal schooling (Naviwala 2016).

Theoretical Framework:
The aim of this study is to understand the main reasons behind Pakistan's out-of-school children (OOSC) crisis and to explain how centralized education governance, socio-economic pressures and the public–private schooling divide contribute to this problem. To achieve this, the study adopts several theoretical perspectives that together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding why the OOSC crisis has deepened over time. This integrated framework draws on Human Capital Theory, Institutional Theory, leadership theories and additional models of motivation and organizational change.

Human Capital Theory (Clark and Martorell 2014; Lovenheim and Turner 2018) explains how families make decisions about investment in education. The theory suggests that people pursue education to increase productivity and improve future earnings. Parents are therefore

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more likely to send children to school when they expect education to lead to better jobs and higher income. In Pakistan, however, the unemployment rate remains close to 8 percent (IMF 2025), and many educated young people struggle to find work. When families observe low economic returns to schooling, they lose confidence in education and may choose child labor instead. This reduces enrollment and contributes to rising OOSC numbers.

Institutional Theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977) helps explain why education reforms in Pakistan often fail to improve public schools. Governments frequently introduce modern and attractive policies, but many of these remain symbolic and poorly implemented. Weak governance due to centralization, limited accountability and highly centralized decision-making lead to a "policy on paper but not in practice" situation. As a result, public schools continue to suffer from low quality and poor service delivery, which further erodes public trust and increases dropout. Clive Barrow's work on followership highlights that leaders succeed only when followers like teachers, principals and communities, are empowered and able to participate actively in decisionmaking. Centralized education systems restrict this participation and weaken school-level leadership (Barrow 2020).

Servant Leadership (Northouse 2018; Peters 2010) emphasizes that leaders must remove obstacles and support their teams. In Pakistan, top-level leaders often remain detached from school realities and their focus on centralized control creates large gaps between policy and implementation. Empowering principals, the lowest tier of formal education leadership, can help remove these barriers, as they understand local needs and can respond more effectively. Joseph Trimble's work on culture and leadership further shows that leadership must reflect local cultural contexts. Pakistan is culturally and linguistically diverse, and centrally imposed, uniform policies rarely succeed in such varied environments (Trimble 2015).

By integrating these theories, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interplay between empowered leadership, decentralized governance, institutional effectiveness, motivation and human capital development. This approach highlights how reforms in these areas can improve school quality, strengthen community trust and ultimately reduce the OOSC crisis in Pakistan.

The costs of decentralization in Pakistan and OOSC

Rind (2024) describes decentralization and motivation as the cardinal principles in education governance. From Max Weber to Maslow, theorists emphasize that organizations function better when authority is appropriately delegated and leaders are motivated by both basic needs (such as esteem) and self-actualization. This view aligns with the idea that organizational structures should empower individuals at different levels to act effectively (Bolman and Deal 2017). It is also consistent with the principle that leaders who try to control everything end up controlling nothing and true leadership becomes possible only when actions are delegated to others (Willink 2020)

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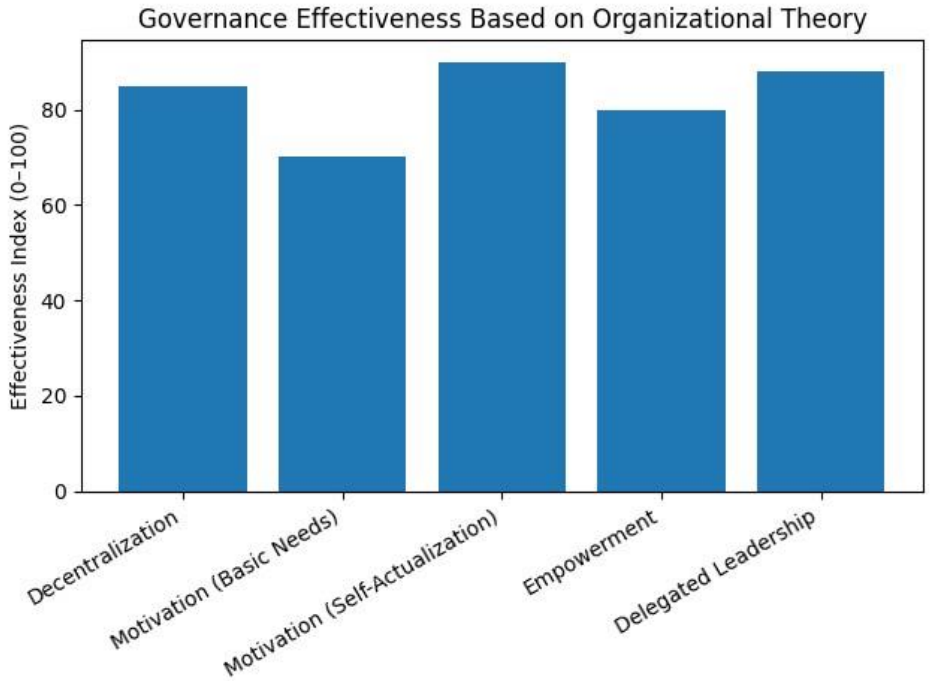

However, Pakistan's education governance is exact opposite of it. It is highly centralized at the provincial level. Decisions about teachers hiring, accountability, school development initiatives, classroom activities and course design are directly dictated by provincial heads. In theory, this offers standardization and fairness, but in practice it is the root cause of poor education governance, demotivation, and disconnect between policy decisions and the real needs of schools which together compound the OOSC crisis.

As a head of school administration in Chakwal, a district in the province of Punjab, I saw this problem firsthand. A girls 'primary school urgently needed a boundary wall for safety due to its collapse by heavy rains. Although the school administration and I myself agreed that it requires immediate action. Even then the request needed to be sent to the provincial headquarters for final approval and release of funds. The process took months. The delay made it clear that the people who understand local problems do not have the authority to solve them. This gap between responsibility and authority is common throughout Pakistan. Local officers are expected to deliver without enough authority or resources at their disposal. This ultimately reduces innovation and leads to professional disempowerment at the local level, sowing the seed of poor education governance leading to OOSC.

In the context of protecting institutional integrity and infrastructure, the integration of Business Process Intelligence (BPI) with artificial intelligence(Nasim et al., 2023) has emerged as a essential for real-time threat detection in critical industries (Jabed & Ferdous, 2024). By leveraging AI-driven analytics, organizations can significantly strengthen cybersecurity infrastructure, transforming traditional reactive measures into proactive defense mechanisms (Ankhi, 2025). This synergy is further realized through advanced frameworks for next-generation intrusion detection systems, which combine business intelligence with machine learning to enhance enterprise security and operational intelligence (Jabed et al., 2023, 2025). Such frameworks provide business analysts with the tools necessary to maintain digital trust and safeguard complex data environments against evolving cyber threats.

Professional Disempowerment and Weak Accountability

A major source of professional disempowerment is the failure of top leadership to remove barriers that prevent subordinates from performing their roles effectively**.** This perspective

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emphasizes that leaders should reflect on whether they have taken steps to remove obstacles from the lives of their subordinates (Peters 2010). It also highlights that leadership is fundamentally about enabling others rather than exercising control over them (Peters 2010). Centralization undermines this principle. Leaders at the top tier of education governance should realize that their subordinates also need authority to implement policies to achieve the goals of organization of which they all are employees. Leaders should understand that lack of power at lower level weakens the overall structure of the education system. Delegation and empowerment go hand in hand. Just think of a situation where a principal cannot hold a teacher accountable for poor performance. Can, then, that principal be held responsible for weak student outcomes? This is one of the biggest weakness of a governance system where power is concentrated at the top. In Pakistan, all matters related to school administration, be it hiring of teachers, change in class schedules or even minor infrastructural issues are dealt and decided at provincial levels. Consequently, principals have very little influence over their subordinates which ultimately affects student outcomes and performance of schools. A system that assigns responsibility but does not give authority creates frustration, reduces initiative and weakens leadership at the school level. Such disempowerment at the lower tiers of leadership weakens education governance. Local school leaders become least interested in doing their jobs with no common sense of purpose. As a result, teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships, which form the bedrock of a strong school system collapses. This collapse ultimately demotivates students to attend schools.

Centralization Kills Local Initiatives and Innovations

The modernization of institutional frameworks relies heavily on integrating AI-driven administrative automation, which significantly enhances operational efficiency and security protocols (Hassaan, Akbar, Jamshaid, Niaz, Akbar, et al., 2025). This technological shift extends to supply chain operations, where machine learning optimizes demand forecasting and logistics—offering a blueprint for more efficient resource distribution in large-scale public systems (Hassaan, Akbar, Niaz, et al., 2025). However, the rise of agentic AI and disinformation tools like deepfakes poses a challenge to digital trust and governance, necessitating a robust competency framework for education and workforce systems (Jamshaid, Hassaan, et al., 2025; Jamshaid, Akbar, et al., 2025). Preparing human oversight talent to manage these complex AI environments is essential for ensuring that digital transformations remain inclusive and ethically grounded.

One of the most damaging effects of centralization is the way it suppresses local school leadership and prevents context-specific solutions from emerging. “People from different cultural backgrounds also follow people who lead differently,” argues Joseph Trimble in his talk on Culture and Leadership. Through Diane’s story, Trimble emphasizes that culturally sensitive, collaborative leadership is more relevant today than rigid models. The Diane example illustrates this clearly. Diane worked in a culturally diverse community where traditional, top-down leadership approaches had repeatedly failed. Instead of asserting authority or imposing predetermined solutions, she spent time listening, understanding local norms and building relationships. By engaging the community and inviting their participation, she was able to design solutions that were culturally appropriate, widely accepted, and effective (Trimble 2015). Her approach demonstrates how leadership rooted in cultural sensitivity, collaboration and local trust can generate innovative responses to complex problems. Decentralization allows space for leaders like Diane to emerge at the local level. However, centralization, on the other hand, promotes alpha male style of leadership which is bound to fail in culturally diverse settings. Schools operate in different cultures and thus require different styles of leadership to engage with local community and ensure parental involvement in enhancing educational outcomes and dealing with issues like

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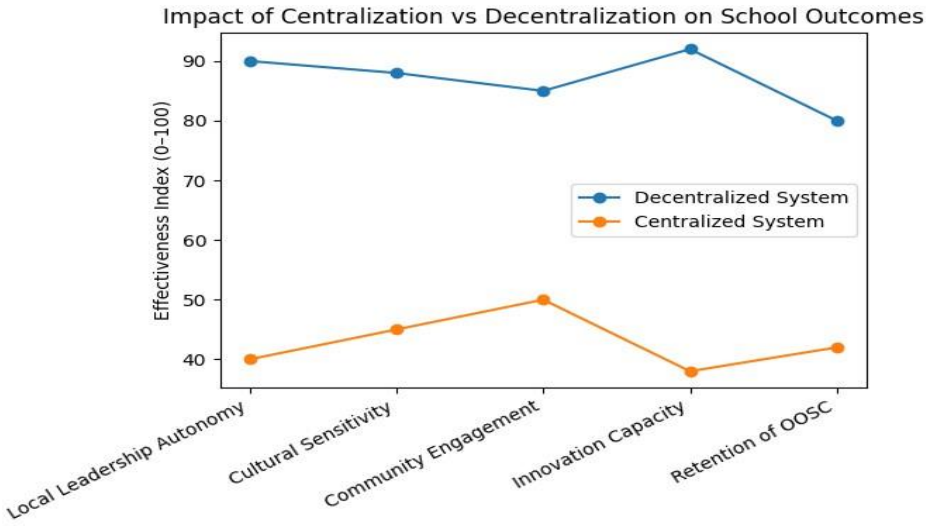
OOSC. Without the flexibility to respond to these specific challenges, schools cannot design practical solutions to keep children enrolled. As a result, centralization weakens local ownership, discourages innovation and contributes directly to the persistence of out-of-school children, particularly in marginalized or remote areas.



One-Size-Fits-All Policies Ignore Local Realities

Centralization also contributes to Pakistan's out-of-school children (OOSC) crisis through uniform, "one-size-fits-all" policies. These policies are formed at the national level or at least provincial level and often ignore important local differences in language, geography, culture, gender norms, security issues and poverty. Although provincial authorities intend to promote fairness, they assume that all schools and communities are the same. In reality, this approach ends up hurting the children who already struggle the most to access education.

Curriculum reform is a clear example. When a centrally designed curriculum does not match local needs, such as using a language children do not speak at home or content unrelated to rural life, students see school as irrelevant. This affects girls and children from poor families the most, leading to low enrollment and high dropout, which directly increases the number of OOSC (Sohail 2025).

Similarly, many national education reforms in Pakistan follow standardized models that do not fit the different conditions of each region. Research shows that these reforms are often created at the top without taking into consideration the local cultural nuances and practices or community realities (Sohail 2025). Similarly, there has been a lot of hue and cry on policy borrowing. There have been serious reservations on importing foreign best practices without adapting them to Pakistan's context. This results in reforms that look good on paper but have little effect in classrooms. For example, donor agencies like Asian Development Bank, UNESCO and others expect governments to adopt their policies without realizing the local needs and issues and their donations are often associated with their kind of policy implementation. (Crossley 2014; Pasha 2023).

Pakistan is extremely diverse, from big cities like Karachi and Lahore to remote villages in Baluchistan, tribal areas and rural Sindh. Yet national programs such as school construction schemes often assume that the same solution will work everywhere. In reality, challenges such as long travel distances and restrictive gender norms in places like Baluchistan require different locally tailored strategies.

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When centrally designed reforms ignore these differences, they may be modern and well-crafted but will only be implemented on paper and fail to reach the children who need support the most, especially girls and children in remote or vulnerable communities (Meyer and Rowan 1977). This gap between national policy and local reality fails to foster local ownership and becomes a major driver of Pakistan's out-of-school children crisis.

Decentralization in the United States: Lessons from a Contrasting Model

Unlike Pakistan, where 100 percent of the funding is done and controlled by the provincial governments**, i**n the U.S., school spending are shared across federal, state and local government levels. The federal government contributes less than 8 percent of education spending, states around 45 percent and local governments contribute nearly 50 percent of overall spending of schools. (Lovenheim and Turner 2018). The share of states in the U.S has recently seem the surge due to some court-led legislative reforms aimed at reducing financial disparities across school districts which has led to reduction of local government share from around 80 percent in 1920s to 50 percent (Corcorn and Evans 2015). This system of school spending enables school to spend quickly and efficiently while ensuring transparency due to an oversight of their immediate local government to whom the school administration is answerable.

Community Participation and empowering local school leadership

Education governance system becomes stronger when local community actively participate and hold school leaders accountable rather than remaining silent. This concept is clearly visible in the U.S. school education system. Parents and community members regularly attend school board meetings, raise concerns and collaborate with school leaders. Their involvement promotes transparency and ensures quicker responses to children's needs. Such active participation is only possible when the governance structure allows it. Decentralization and increased involvement of local governments encourage this form of engagement by giving communities real authority in shaping educational decisions. When parents and local groups are empowered to speak up, monitor school functioning and push relevant leaders to address problems, it leads to trust building and the entire system becomes more responsive. This trust and responsiveness is especially important for preventing dropouts. For example, when a school lacks transportation, faces safety concerns for girls or struggles with teacher absenteeism, community pressure in decentralized systems often compels school leaders to act quickly, helping keep children in school.

In centralized systems like Pakistan's, however, parents often feel disconnected from the education bureaucracy. Decisions are made far away and community members have no formal channels through which they can influence school conditions. As a result, issues that directly affect enrollment such as unsafe routes to school, lack of female teachers, broken toilets, overcrowded classrooms or discriminatory practices remain unreported or unaddressed for long periods. When parents see that their concerns lead to no meaningful action, they lose trust in the system. Many eventually stop sending their children, particularly girls, because they do not see school as a safe or supportive place.

***Enhanced accountability with incentives*.**

Local governance allows government to hold poor performers accountable swiftly. As decentralization allows easy access and scrutiny of educational settings, accountability yields results. When local school leaders, like principals and school district leaders, have the authority to check teacher attendance, address weak instruction and intervene early when students show signs of disengagement, schools are able to prevent dropout before it happens. However, accountability alone could backfire. Accountability should always come with incentives as well. Those who perform better should be incentivized so that educators are motivated. New York City's SPBP (School wide Performance Bonus Program) provides an

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example of one district's approach to addressing the performance challenge through accountability and incentives simultaneously. SPBP was a voluntary program jointly sponsored by the New York City
Department of Education (NYCDOE) and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and implemented in about 200 high-needs schools (grades K-12) from 2007-2008 through 20092010. If a participating school met its annual performance target, it could receive school-level bonus awards equal to $3,000 per full-time UFT-represented staff member working at the school (including teachers, support staff, and counselors). (Marsh 2012). This shows how accountability should always come with incentives for those who perform better. Accountability without incentives bears no fruit. Jacob (2005) also describes such policy in Chicago public schools meant to raise students' academic achievements where low performing schools were reconstituted and teacher were dismissed from jobs. However, the better performing teachers were awarded huge bonuses as well. The policy resulted in improved academic achievements for students. Hence, enhanced accountability along with incentives for high performers creates a competitive environment where children and parents pose trust and confidence in schools.
Resultantly, they feel happy to send their children to such schools where teachers put their sincere efforts in bringing best out of children.
Pakistan's centralized education system lacks these mechanisms. Education system works without accountability and incentive mechanisms. Teachers attend school for the sakes of jobs with no goals and passion to teach students. School leaders have very little authority to take action when teachers perform poorly and they cannot create reward systems to encourage good performance. When there are complaints about teacher absenteeism, bad teaching or poor management, these complaints must go through many bureaucratic levels, which causes long delays or no solution at all. These problems directly contribute to the out-of-school children crisis. When teachers are frequently absent, unmotivated or not properly supervised, classrooms become unproductive and discouraging. Parents lose trust in the school's ability to provide quality education and may decide to withdraw their children from school completely.

Professional Autonomy

Harvard, one of the world's best institution over years follow its philosophy of 'Every tub on its own bottom'. 'Schools have fiscal autonomy, and individual professors have enormous discretion. They have substantial control over what courses they teach, what research they do, and which university activities they pursue, if any. Faculty meetings are typically sparsely attended. If a dean or a department head wants a faculty member to chair a committee or offer a new course, the request is more often a humble entreaty than an authoritative command.'(Bolman and Deal 2017). This reflects a broader culture of professional trust.
Delegation of authority and autonomy at all levels of leadership is Harvard's key to becoming world's best educational hub.
Professional autonomy is as important for local school leaders as is for a secretary heading the education department. In decentralized education systems, like the U.S. principals help shape hiring decisions, planning and curriculum adjustments. Principals are deeply involved in supervising and developing staff. This builds confidence, encourages innovation, and strengthens collaboration.
By contrast, in a centralized system of governance, principals cannot reward good teachers or address chronic underperformance because they lack necessary authority. Without this autonomy, centralized systems like Pakistan struggle to respond to the diverse realities of its

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communities. This gap between policy and real life contributes directly to the persistence of outof-school children crisis, especially in remote or marginalized areas.

Socioeconomic Factors

Socioeconomic conditions are one of the strongest reasons why many children in Pakistan remain out of school. Families facing poverty, food insecurity and unstable income often struggle to prioritize education when daily survival is their main concern. In such situations, parents make schooling decisions based on immediate financial needs rather than long-term benefits. These pressures become even stronger when families see that education does not always lead to good jobs, which reduces their trust in schooling. As a result, many children are sent to work, kept at home to help with household duties, or withdrawn from school when families cannot afford basic costs. In this way, economic hardship shapes not only whether children start school but also whether they stay and succeed, making socioeconomic factors a major cause of the OOSC crisis. In the context of modernizing social systems, the integration of artificial intelligence is redefining both healthcare and digital security, providing a blueprint for data-driven institutional reform. Advanced hybrid models and deep learning are now enhancing diagnostic accuracy in medical imaging for cancer and cardiovascular diseases while tailoring precision nutrition based on genetic profiles (Zainab et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). However, these AI-powered healthcare solutions also bring critical ethical considerations and data privacy challenges that must be addressed to ensure stakeholder trust (Zainab et al., 2025d). Simultaneously, the dual role of AI in cybersecurity acting both as a sophisticated defense mechanism and a generator of new threats is reshaping how industries protect digital landscapes (Arif et al., 2024, 2025a; Khan et al., 2025a). By synergizing AI-driven insights with robust anomaly detection in the Internet of Health Things (IoHT), a holistic framework can be established to safeguard digital equity and mitigate risks across healthcare and industrial sectors (Arif et al., 2023; Khan, 2025).

Poverty and Child labour

Pakistan faces high levels of poverty, and this has direct implications for education. According to the revised global income thresholds, 44.7 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. This means that almost half of all families are unable to meet basic needs such as food, housing and health care (World Bank 2024). In these circumstances, schooling is rarely the first priority. Instead, poor households constantly assess the costs and benefits of sending a child to school versus sending them to work.

For many poor families, children's income is not optional, it is essential. About 3.3 million of Pakistani children are trapped in child labor, depriving them of their childhood, their health and education and condemning them to a life of poverty (UNICEF n.d.). Children work in agriculture, workshops, markets, brick kilns and other informal sectors in abysmal conditions. When a child spends long hours working, regular attendance, homework and exam preparation become extremely difficult. Even if a child is enrolled in a school, it becomes almost impossible to keep the pace with class requirements and dropout becomes likely.

At the same time, schooling carries costs. Direct costs include uniforms, stationery, exam fees and transport. For a family living in poverty, these costs can feel unbearable. As UNESCO (2022) notes, poor families often see schooling as a financial burden, not an investment. This perception is rooted in families with many children because educating all of them becomes financially impossible.

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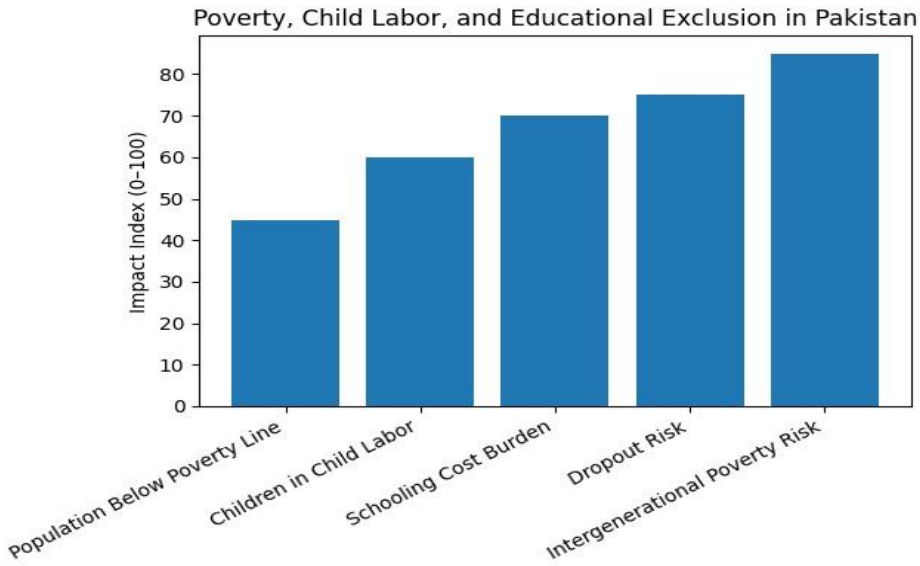

Child labor and poverty therefore create a vicious cycle. Because the family is poor, children are sent to work; because children work, they either do not attend school at all or quickly fall behind and drop out; because they leave school early, they grow up with low skills and low productivity, remaining stuck in low-paid jobs; and so the next generation faces the same poverty and the same decisions. In this way, socioeconomic factors do not just produce a one-time OOSC problem; they reproduce educational exclusion across generations.

Unemployment and discouragement to attain education

Poverty alone does not explain the full picture. Unemployment and underemployment also play a major role in discouraging families from sending children to school. Many parents in Pakistan observe that even those who earn degrees often struggle to find jobs. They see educated young people in their neighborhoods who remain unemployed for years or are forced to accept low-paid and insecure work that does not seem very different from what an uneducated person could do.

This experience shapes parental expectations. According to human capital theory, families invest in education when they believe that it shall increase productivity, wages and their chances of getting employed (Clark and Martorell 2014). In Pakistan, however, the labor market fails to reward educational attainment in a clear and visible way. Economy is in shambles with almost a dead private sector. Returns to education have always been bleak. When parents see educated people unemployed around them, they begin to question whether schooling is worth it.

In many low-income communities, it is common to hear stories such as: “Our neighbor’s son has a degree, but he is still sitting at home,” or “My cousin studied for many years, but now he earns almost the same as a laborer.” These everyday examples are powerful. For a poor family deciding between sending a child to school or to work, the sight of educated but jobless youth sends a strong negative signal. It creates the belief that education does not guarantee a better future, especially in the absence of connections or political influence.

Unemployment, therefore, directly undermines the perceived economic return to education. Parents conclude that if education does not lead to employment, then investing resources in schooling is useless and foolish. In such circumstances, they may decide that it is more rational to send children to work early so that they learn some skill set early in their lives and can start contributing to the family’s income. This is particularly true for boys, who are

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expected to become breadwinners and whose education is often seen as secondary when resources are limited.

In this way, unemployment and joblessness of educated people indirectly fuel the OOSC crisis.

They do so not by removing schools, but by removing hope. When parents lose hope that schooling will change their children's economic prospects, they withdraw their children physically or mentally from the education system.

U.S. Comparison: Inequality, but no OOSC.

A comparison with the United States shows that poverty does not automatically translate into high numbers of out-of-school children. There is no doubt that the U.S. faces serious issues income disparities and education inequality: students from disadvantaged families experience higher dropout rates, lower academic performance and substantial gaps in achievement (Heckman et al. 2010). They struggle with food insecurity and unstable housing. Yet despite these challenges, children from poor households almost universally remain enrolled in school. It is extremely rare for a child to be entirely outside the formal education system.

Jacob (2011) argues that there are definite problems in terms of academic performance of disadvantaged students, but this does not mean that they do not attend school. Poor children may score lower on tests, graduate at lower rates or struggle to access college, but they are not absent from the education system altogether. Augustine (2020) similarly observes that U.S. schools operate under a set of institutional mechanisms, including compulsory schooling laws, truancy monitoring systems and integrated social services that make school attendance a legal and social obligation. For example, if a student is absent for several days without a clear reason, the school is required to contact the parents immediately. If the absences continue, an attendance officer or school social worker visits the home to understand the problem and offer support, such as arranging transport or connecting the family to welfare services. When a child still does not return to school, the case is referred to local social services, who work with the family to resolve deeper issues, including financial hardship, family conflict, or health concerns. In cases where parents refuse to cooperate, the matter can be taken to a family court, and parents may face fines
or mandatory counselling. As Augustine (2020) notes, through this step-by-step intervention, system ensures that school attendance is not optional and that children cannot simply disappear from the education system.

What distinguishes the U.S. context is not the absence of education inequality, which is widely acknowledged, but the presence of strict enforcement and strong safety nets that ensure children remain in school. School districts actively monitor attendance. Parents can face legal consequences for chronic non-attendance and social services intervene when children are not enrolled. Furthermore, government supported meal programs, transportation support and welfare assistance reduce the financial burden on families making school attendance easier even for the poorest households.

As a result, although debates over dropout and inequality persist, poverty does not push children out of the education system in the same way it does in Pakistan. The U.S. achieves nearuniversal enrollment because the state enforces schooling as a right and a responsibility. This comparison shows an important point: poverty affects education differently based on how serious the state is in matters of education and how well policies are enforced. In Pakistan, where there are no social safety nets and monitoring mechanisms, poverty and unemployment exacerbates the OOSC. Families under economic stress receive no support and there are no strong accountability structures pushing parents to send their children to schools. Thus, economic and social conditions in Pakistan result in many children being excluded from education, a pattern completely different from the United States.

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Quality vs Expense: A Public–Private Education Conundrum Feeding Pakistan's OOSC Crisis

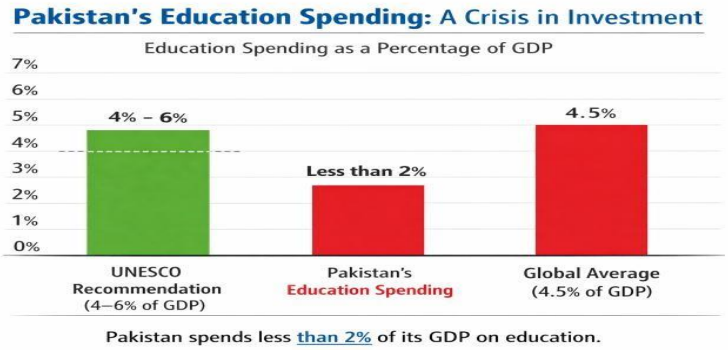
Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of 5 and 16. This constitutional mandate places full responsibility on the state to provide accessible, equitable and quality schooling for every child. However, the reality of Pakistan's education landscape presents a sharp contradiction to this ideal. Public schools, intended to be the backbone of universal education, struggle with chronic underfunding, poor facilities, weak governance and low academic performance. In the meantime, a discussion on OOSC in Pakistan is anemic without discussing private schooling. Almost 40 percent of Pakistani students are enrolled in private schools. At the same time, such private schools, although often perceived as providing quality, charge fees that remain unaffordable for the majority of low-income households. This quality–expense dilemma lies at the heart of Pakistan's out-of-school children (OOSC) crisis (Naviwala 2016).

As Baloch, Jariko, and Mughal (2018) argues, the failure of public schools combined with the high cost of private quality education leaves disadvantaged families with few viable options. Many poor families either enroll children in low-quality public schools where learning is minimal or withdraw them altogether because they cannot afford private schooling. In many cases, children enter the labor force instead. The scale of the divide is visible: around 45 percent of Pakistani students attend private schools, usually without government support, while 55 percent rely on public schools that often fail to meet basic educational standards. This imbalance reflects systemic inequities that shape educational opportunities and fuel the OOSC problem.

Low Public Spending and Its Consequences

A major structural factor behind Pakistan's OOSC crisis is the poor quality of public schools resulting from insufficient public investment. Pakistan spends less than 2 percent of its GDP on education, far below UNESCO's recommended 4–6 percent (World Bank 2023; Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training 2024c). This chronic underinvestment affects every part of the education system, including teacher recruitment, school infrastructure, learning resources, administrative capacity and curriculum implementation. With limited funds, many public schools are unable to provide even the most basic facilities.

Low investment also leads to overcrowded classrooms, multi-grade teaching, teacher shortages, and outdated textbooks. These conditions create weak learning environments that discourage both parents and children. Poor families may initially send their children to public schools, but regular exposure to weak teaching quality and inadequate facilities gradually erodes trust in the system. When children do not learn, they lose interest, fall behind, or depend on private tutoring that most families cannot afford. Over time, these problems push children toward absenteeism and dropout (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training 2024a).



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While insufficient spending is a major concern, the ineffective use of existing funds is equally problematic. Even the limited money allocated to education is often misused, mismanaged, or
lost due to corruption. Resources are rarely deployed efficiently. Debates about education finance exist even in developed countries like the United States, where different scholars argue that discussions should focus not only on how much money is spent but also on how it is spent(Burnam 2018). The same logic applies to Pakistan: increasing financial investment must go hand in hand with stronger accountability and transparent spending.
Pakistan's low and often poorly utilized education funding not only slows progress but actively contributes to the OOSC crisis by failing to provide families with a compelling reason to keep their children in school.

Poor Facilities and Family Perceptions of Public Schools

Beyond funding shortages, public schools in Pakistan suffer from serious infrastructural deficiencies. (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training 2024a) reports that a large number of schools lack essential facilities such as boundary walls, functioning toilets, electricity, clean drinking water, and safe classrooms. In rural areas, some schools operate in dilapidated buildings or open spaces, exposing children to weather hazards and safety risks. Girls are disproportionately affected, as families often insist on secure boundary walls and gendersegregated toilets for their daughters 'safety and dignity.
Parents avoid public schools not only because of academic concerns but because schools do not meet minimum safety and sanitation standards. A school without clean water or toilets becomes a site of discomfort and danger. In many communities, parents decide that it is better to keep children at home, or send them to work, than expose them to unsafe and unhealthy school environments. This decision is rational when viewed from the perspective of survival and wellbeing.
In addition, overcrowded classrooms and unmotivated teachers reinforce parental dissatisfaction. When children spend years in public schools but struggle to read, write, or perform simple arithmetic, parents lose confidence in the education system. Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (2024a) and UNESCO Islamabad (2023) both highlight that families consistently cite poor quality as a major reason for withdrawing children from public schools.
For low-income families who can barely afford tuition fees, private schools remain out of reach. Thus, when public schools fail both academically and infrastructurally, the result is not a shift to private schools but a shift to no school at all, expanding the OOSC population.

Poor Academic Performance and Loss of Parental Trust

Poor academic outcomes contribute significantly to educational exclusion. Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (2024a) highlights that learning levels in many public schools remain far below national and international benchmarks. Children often advance through grades without acquiring foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Condition of the private schools, except a few that are only within the reach of upper echelons of the society due to high fee structure, present the same dismal condition of education. Parental trust erodes when they witness children attending school for years without meaningful learning gains. When families see older students unable to read a newspaper, do basic mathematics, or compete for entry tests, they question the purpose of schooling.
High poverty interacts with poor educational quality. Families living in precarious economic conditions hesitate to invest time or money in a system that fails to deliver real outcomes. Many parents, especially in rural communities, to religious seminaries where food and lodging may be

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provided. While these decisions reduce immediate financial strain, they lead to long-term exclusion from the formal education system.

Poor academic quality also affects first-generation learners, children whose parents are uneducated or minimally literate. These families depend entirely on schools to provide learning. When schools fail, these children have little chance of catching up. Thus, the public–private quality divide puts parents in a paradoxical position; they do not want to send their children to public school lacking basic facilities, but cannot afford to send children to private schools either. Consequently, they are left with no option but to put their children in some kind of menial work feeding to OOSC crisis.

The Private School Paradox: Perceived Quality, Prohibitive Costs

Private schools in Pakistan occupy a complex position. On one hand, they are widely perceived as offering better quality education, more discipline, regular teacher attendance, stronger English instruction and better exam results. This perception drives even low-income families to pursue low-fee private schools when possible. These schools charge between $3 and $25 per month. Their per child cost is half of what the government spends, but they produce students who are two grades ahead of those in government schools (Naviwala 2016). On the other hand, private schools remain financially inaccessible for millions of poor households. All private schools operate without government support and even when tuition fees are modest by middle-class standards, they exceed what families living below the poverty line can afford.

This creates a paradox: private schools offer quality that families desire but cannot access; public schools offer affordability but not quality. As a result, children who cannot afford private schooling and who find public schooling ineffective or unsafe often drop out entirely. Families faced with the choice between an unaffordable private school and an inadequate public school may opt to keep children home or send them to work.

Moreover, the presence of private schools enhances inequality. Middle- and upper-income families exit the public system, leaving public schools with weaker advocacy, lower enrollment, and fewer resources. Without stronger regulation, public funding, or quality assurance mechanisms, the dual system reinforces socioeconomic segregation. This fragmented structure is unlike education systems in countries like the U.S. where public education remains the primary and equitable provider.

U.S. Comparison: Free and Quality Education as a Public Good

In contrast to Pakistan's fragmented system, the United States offers free, universally accessible public education supported by substantial financial investment. Public schools in the U.S. are fully open-enrollment institutions that provide essential facilities, electricity, sanitation, transportation, heating, modern classrooms, and safe buildings, as standard. Interviews with parents and school leaders consistently indicate that basic infrastructure is never considered optional; it is guaranteed by law and funded through local, state, and federal budgets.

The U.S. invests heavily in education. Through mechanisms such as equalizing finance reforms, as documented by Jackson et al. (2014) and Corcoran and Evans (2015), poorer districts receive supplemental funds designed to reduce inequities. These policies reflect the belief that public education is a public good essential for democracy and economic mobility. Even though disparities still exist, the state assumes the responsibility of ensuring that every child has access to adequate schooling.

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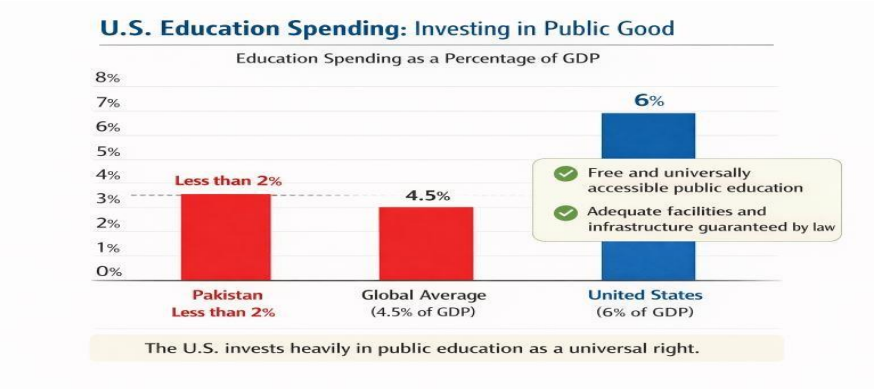

Furthermore, while private schools do exist in the United States, they remain a small and marginal part of the educational landscape. Research by Kho et al. (2020) finds that when controlling for student background, public schools often outperform or perform on par with charter schools, magnet schools and other private schools in academic achievement and longterm outcomes. This indicates that quality in the U.S. is not dependent on private providers but embedded in the public sector itself.

Some U.S. states have also introduced voucher programs, allowing students from low-income or geographically isolated communities to attend private schools if public schools cannot adequately serve them. These vouchers are tightly regulated, targeted, and often designed to reduce inequities, not to replace the public system but to complement it (Lovenheim and Turner 2018). The guiding principle is clear: no child should be excluded from education due to poverty or geography.

Key Policy Insights

In the evolving landscape of predictive modeling, the integration of artificial intelligence has become pivotal across diverse sectors, ranging from economic recovery to precision medicine. For instance, AI-driven predictive analytics have been instrumental in optimizing capital deployment and fostering startup resilience in the post-pandemic United States (Begum, 2022, 2025). This capacity for optimization extends into supply chain management and hospital operations, where machine learning frameworks enhance business decision-making and clinical workflow efficiency (Ahmed et al., 2025; Mishu et al., 2024). Furthermore, the application of deep learning in oncology, specifically through frameworks like SparseGene and AttenGene, has revolutionized gene selection for precision medicine (Begum et al., 2025a; Liya et al., 2025). Beyond healthcare and finance, robotic AI systems are now being utilized to secure IoT-connected social media environments by detecting fake news through sensor-driven cross-verification (Begum et al., 2025b).School enrollment improves in systems where policies are driven by local communities, where parents trust public education institutions, where schools offer adequate facilities and where public schools are strong enough to compete with private institutions in terms of quality. In a world where universal education and social progress move together, Pakistan continues to struggle with its persistent OOSC crisis. To move toward becoming what Baker (2024) calls a "schooled society," the country must first address its foundational weaknesses. Although this goal may seem distant, taking a set of basic, initial steps can put Pakistan on the path to educating its large population of out-of-school children. In this regard, the following key policy insights are proposed:

- *Decentralize the education governance system*:

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Pakistan's policies are often strong on paper but weak in implementation leading to poor governance. A major reason is the highly centralized governance structure, which slows decision-making and disconnects schools from community needs. Decentralizing education governance, especially by strengthening the role of local governments, would make service delivery more responsive and context-based.

Empower school principals as frontline leaders:

Principals are the first and most immediate leaders in the education hierarchy. Delegating administrative, financial and academic authority to school heads would enable them to address problems quickly, motivate teachers and implement reforms suited to local conditions.

- *Strengthen parental responsibility through social safety nets and enforcement mechanisms:*

Ensuring that parents send their children to school requires supportive and firm measures. Introducing strong social protection systems, like the U.S., can help reduce OOSC.

- *Introduce targeted voucher programs for disadvantaged families:*

For many poor households, quality private schooling remains unaffordable. A voucher system for the poorest families can offer equitable access to private schools, especially where public schools perform poorly or are hard to reach.

Policy solutions cannot simply be copied; Pakistan must build institutional strength through decentralized education governance, involvement of local governments, increasing stakes of local community, holding parents accountable for their out of school children and engaging private schools through voucher systems for poor families.

Conclusion

The out-of-school children (OOSC) crisis in Pakistan is caused by several connected problems. Centralized control of education has made it hard for schools to respond to local needs and weak accountability has allowed poor performance to continue. Poverty and unemployment also make it difficult for families to send children to school, especially when they see educated people still struggling to find jobs. At the same time, the public–private education gap creates another
challenge: public schools often lack quality, while private schools are too expensive for most families. Because of all these reasons, many children remain out of school.

Decentralizing authority to local governments is essential for education governance, as local actors understand community needs better and can respond more quickly. Local governments led initiatives involve parents and community members in school decision-making leading to build trust building, transparency and encouraging school enrollments. Similarly, school infrastructure needs urgent improvement so that children have safe and functional learning environments. The quality of public schools should be strengthened through better teacher training, accountability, and learning support. Targeted voucher programs can help disadvantaged families' access private schools when public schools are not available or performing poorly. At the same time, the rapid growth of private schools must be monitored and guided to ensure minimum quality standards.

Pakistan can only meet the promise of Article 25-A by improving public school quality, supporting families and creating a system where every child, regardless of income, has access to quality education that add to their human and social capital.

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